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ABSTRACT

Sex differences in influencability have emerged when discrepant advocacies were accompanied by greater expertise in the subject matter by men or women. Two types of stimuli, one about which men relative to women had high prior knowledge (football tackles) and one about which women had higher prior knowledge (women's fashions), were selected. Men (N=16) and women (N=16) rated photographs of football tackles and women's fashions on various dimensions. All photographs were accompanied by comments, either factual/descriptive, evaluative/accurate, or evaluative/inaccurate. The major dependent variable was the extent to which the subjects agreed with these comments. When both men and women were asked if they agreed with an inaccurate evaluation, agreement was lowest when prior knowledge was high. Men, compared to women, were less willing to agree with an accurate evaluation. Results suggest that, for attitude-congruent advocacies, gender-role cues a script for the socially acceptable level of agreeableness: agreement with inaccurate evaluations appears to be more content-based. (Author/NRB)

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Sex Differences in Influenceability:

Toward Specifying the Underlying Processes[1]

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Sex Differences in Influenceability
Toward Specifying the Underlying Processes[1]

As Eagly (1978) noted recently, analyses of sex differences in influenceability were often secondary to the major purpose of investigations. As a result, persuasive materials were selected without regard for sex differences in prior knowledge or interest. The contents of these materials may commonly have been masculine, thereby according men greater motivation and/or ability to pro- or conterargue attitude-discrepant advocacies than women (e.g., Janis and Field, 1959). When prior knowledge about the experimental materials was apparently greater for women than men, however, the opposite effect was obtained (Feldman, 1974). Further, when the type of materials was varied so that men were most knowledgeable rather than the subject's sex accounted for resistance to influence (e.g., Sistrunck & McDavid, 1979). It is notable that in this research, the advocacy was discrepant from the subjects' initial attitude. Agreement, therefore indicated a compromise, at least publically, of attitudes and possibly signaled cognitive reorganization.

We may conclude from this research that when the influence-attempt is attitude-discrepant (e.g., subjectively inaccurate), both women and men are motivated to counterargue the advocacy. Resistance to influence, however is a function of the motivation and ability to counterargue. Prior knowledge about the topic facilitates the ability to counterargue and produces resistance to discrepant advocacies (Sistrunk & McDavid, 1971). On the other hand, when endorsing the advocated position holds low long-term cognitive consequences (e.g., when it is perceived as basically accurate), motivation and ability to elaborate cognitively upon the message content are unlikely mediators of acceptance, but rather acceptance may be determined by cues less central to the attitude stimulus or issue (Petty & Cacioppo, 1979; Petty, Cacioppo, & Goldman, Note 2). From Eagly's suggestions regarding the possible attitudinal effects of the female role of peace-keeper (Eagly, 1978) and the male role of dominant leader (Eagly, Wood, & Fishbaugh, Note 1), we reasoned that gender roles may script the level of agreement with attitude-cogruent evaluations.

In sum, the following hypotheses were tested in this study. If an obviously inaccurate evaluation is attributed to an unknown source, resistance should be greatest by women for feminine items and by men for masculine items since these situational characteristics should maximize motivation and ability to counterargue. If the evaluation is accurate, however, agreement with the source does not involve compromising one's personal belief's or substantial cognitive reorganization; but it does require agreeing with another's evaluation. Following Eagly's formulations concerning the attitudinal effects of gender roles, we expected a sex difference in agreeableness to obtain when a source's evaluation is generally congruent with their prior attitude.

Method

Overview

Men and women rated photographs of football tackles and women's fashions on various dimensions. All photographs were accompanied by another person's comments--some of which were factual and descriptive, some of which were evaluative and accurate, and some of which were evaluative and inaccurate. The major dependent measure was the extent to which the subjects agreed with these comments.

Subjects, Materials, and Design

Sixteen men and sixteen women from an introductory psychology course participated to earn extra credit toward their course grade. Their ages ranged from 18 to 21.

Two types of stimuli, one about which men relative to women had high prior knowledge and one about which women compared to men had high prior knowledge, were selected during pilot tests. Photographs of football tackles and women's fashions were found to satisfy the first and second criterion respectively (see also, Tesser & Leone, 1977).[2] Statements about each fashion or tackle were prepared and attributed to an unidentified subject from a "previous study." In all cases, three statements of fact about the stimulus were listed on the back of the photograph (e.g., the dress is blue, the runner's feet are off the ground). These comments were constructed to be as factual and descriptive as possible regarding the quality of the stimulus, and the varacity of the statements could be confirmed easily be persuing the stimulus.

Additionally, a fourth statement was listed for each stimulus. For one third of the stimuli, the fourth statement provided and inaccurate evaluation of the tackle or fashion (e.g., "that's a great tackle," when pictures was a missed tackle). For another third of the stimuli, the statement provided an accurate evaluation of the stimulus (e.g., "that's a chic fashion," when a new and popular fashion was depicted). For the remaining stimuli, the fourth comment was simply another factual descriptor of the stimulus.

All of the subjects viewed all 36 photographs, but half viewed the 18 photographs of women's fashions first, whereas half viewed the 18 photographs of football, tackles first. Other than this constraint, the order of the photographs was determined randomly for each subject. The experimental design thus constituted was a 2 (Order) x 2 (Sex of Subject) x 2 (Type of Stimulus) x 3 (Type of Comment) mixed-model factorial with the first two factors serving as between-subjects manipulations and the remaining factors serving as within subjects manipulations.

Procedure

Subjects were tested individually and believed their task was to assist in the development of stimulus materials for a subsequent study. Subjects were told that their honest personal ratings of the stimuli were all that was sought in this "preliminary work." Each subject was given a stack of 36 photographs and 36 one-page questionnaires. The subject was told that he or she was to inspect each photograph and to read the (four) comments regarding the picture. The subject was informed that previous subjects had written the comments, and that people had reported that the task of rating the photographs was made more interesting by allowing them to read the comments of others. Finally, subjects were instructed to rate the quality of each photograph on two 9-point scales (good-bad; favorable-unfavorable) (these measures were included to lend credence to the cover story) and to rate on a 9-point scale (disagree completely-agree completely) the extent to which they agreed with the comments about the picture made "the other subject" (this served as the measure of social influence).

Results

Means for the measure of agreement are summarized in Table 1. The type of Stimulus (M (fashion) = 6.28, M (tackle) = 5.92), F (1, 28) = 5.34, $p < .03$,

and the Type of Comment (M (inaccurate) = 4.19, M (accurate) = 6.91, M (factual) = 7.19), F (2,56) = 15.12, p < 001, affected agreement. Notably, the main effect for Sex of Subject did not approach significance, F (1,28) = 1.07, p < 30. Interactions were obtained for the following: Sex x Type of Stimulus, F (1,28) = 5.44, p < .03; and Sex x Type of Comment, F (2,56) = 2.85, p < .07.

An a prior comparison was conducted for the specific hypothesis of this study, This contrast held that men would appear more influenceable than women for inaccurate evaluation of feminine items, whereas men would appear less influenceable than women in the remaining instances. This contrast was highly significant, F (1,56) = 22.35, p < .001.

Insert Table 1 about here

Discussion

As hypothesized, both men and women resisted influence when they received an inaccurate (i.e., attitude-discrepant) evaluation regarding the stimulus. Moreover, this resistance was related to the ability and motivation of men and women to develop and buttress criticisms concerning the accuracy of the source's evaluation: Men were most obdurate when viewing masculine items whereas women were most resistant when viewing feminine items. Also as expected, men compared to women were less willing to agree with an accurate (i.e., attitude-congruent) evaluation regarding a stimulus. Whether this sex difference in influenceability is attributable to the male and/or female role is unclear from the present research. Nevertheless, these results illustrate that as the long-term cognitive consequences of endorsing an attitudinal position increase, the thoughts and attitudes of men and women are affected less by peripheral cues and scripted responses, such as those defined by gender roles, and score by the central attributes and implicates of the attitude stimulus.

In closing, we should note some apparent boundary conditions for this formulation. In several studies we found attitude-discrepant advocacies led to more anticipatory topic-relevant thinking (Cacioppo & Petty, in press) and better retention of the message arguments (Cacioppo & Petty, 1979) than did

attitude-congruent advocacies. Similarly, the present analysis of sex differences in influenceability suggests that there are differential long-term cognitive consequences for subjects agreeing with attitude-congruent vs. -discrepant advocacies. Nonetheless, situations may exist in which endorsing an attitude-congruent position yields equally high personal consequences; these situations, of course, should dramatically weaken or eliminate the attitudinal effects of gender roles obtained here for attitude-congruent advocacies.

Second, the present formulation addresses situations in which the salience of gender roles are unformily low across conditions (cf. Eagly at al., Note 1). It is unlikely that subjects' sex was any more salient as they read inaccurate than accurate evaluations of photographs. More likely for our viewpoint is that men and women possess partially nonoverlapping habitual modes of responding (scripts), developed through socialization, and evoked automatically (though not necessarily consciously) when there are few long-term personal consequences involved in agreeing with the advocated position.

Reference Notes

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Footnotes

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[2]Details about the pilot work can be obtained from the first author.

Table 1

Mean Agreement as a Function of Sex of Subject,
Type of Stimulus, and Type of Comment

Type of Stimulus	Sex of Subject	
	Men	Women
Inaccurate evaluation		
Tackle	3.54^{1}	4.30^{23}
Fashion	4.90^{3}	4.02^{12}
Accurate evaluation		
Tackle	6.38^{4}	7.26^{5}
Fashion	6.74^{45}	7.26^{5}
Factual description		
Tackle	6.81^{45}	7.21^{5}
Fashion	7.26^{5}	7.49^{5}

Note: Responses were made on scales where "1" indicated "disagree completely" and "9" indicated "agree completely." Entries with dissimilar superscripts differ at the .05 level (by the Duncan Multiple Range Test).